Victor of Rome

By COGwriter

Who was Victor of Rome? Was he a pope? Was he faithful to the Bible or human tradition?

The generally touted Catholic position is that Victor was the fourteenth pope and that all subsequent leaders of the true church passed through him (Lopes A. The Popes: The lives of the pontiffs through 2000 years of history. Futura Edizoni, Roma, 1997, p. 5). Is that correct?

This article will refer to historical records and Roman Catholic sources to attempt to properly answer those questions.

Certain Claims

While visiting the Vatican in 2004, I purchased a book in its basilica museum bookstore titled *The Popes: The lives of the pontiffs through 2000 years of history* (Lopes A. The Popes: The lives of the pontiffs through 2000 years of history. Futura Edizoni, Roma, 1997). The book states that it is sponsored by the "Pontifical Administration, which has tutelage over the Patriarchal Basilica of St. Peter".

It makes many claims about the early bishops of Rome including this about Victor:

> **14. VICTOR I, ST. (189-199)** An African...Victor tended not to advise other churches but to impose Rome's ideas on them, thus arousing resentment at times in bishops not inclined to accept such impositions. This was the case of Polycratus, the Bishop of Ephesus, who felt offended at this interference. The question was again that of Easter. Victor reaffirmed the decisions of Soter and Eleutherius both with regard to the date, which had to be a Sunday, and with regard to several customs of Jewish origin which were still practiced in some Christian communities...Polycratus justified himself before the pope with a letter containing the phrase "...it is more important to obey God rather than men" (Lopes A. The Popes: The lives of the pontiffs through 2000 years of history. Futura Edizoni, Roma, 1997, p. 5).

The Catholic Encyclopedia notes:

> (189-198 or 199), date of birth unknown. The "Liber Pontificalis" makes him a native of Africa and gives his father the name of Felix...
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> Internal dissensions during this era affected the Church at Rome. The dispute over the celebration of Easter grew more acute. The Christians at Rome, who had come from the province of Asia, were accustomed to observe Easter on the 14th day of Nisan, whatever day of the week that date might happen to fall on, just as they had done at home. This difference inevitably led to trouble when it appeared in the Christian community of Rome. Pope Victor decided, therefore, to bring about unity in the observance of the Easter festival and to persuade the Quartodecimans to join in the general practice of the Church. He wrote, therefore, to Bishop Polycrates of Ephesus and induced the latter to call together the bishops of the province of Asia in order to discuss the matter with them. This was done; but in the letter sent by Polycrates to Pope Victor he declared that he firmly held to the Quartodeciman custom observed by so many celebrated and holy bishops of that region. Victor called a meeting of Italian bishops at Rome, which is the earliest Roman synod known. He also wrote to the leading bishops of the various districts, urging them to call together the bishops of their sections of the country and to take counsel with them on the question of the Easter festival. Letters came from all sides: from the synod in Palestine, at which Theophilus of Caesarea and Narcissus of Jerusalem presided; from the synod of Pontus over which Palmas as the oldest presided; from the communities in Gaul whose bishop of Irenaeus of Lyons; from the bishops of the Kingdom of Osrhoene; also from individual bishops, as Bakchylus of Corinth. These letters all unanimously reported that Easter was observed on Sunday.. Victor, who acted throughout the entire matter as the head of Catholic Christendom, now called upon the bishops of the province of Asia to abandon their custom and to accept the universally prevailing practice of always celebrating Easter on Sunday. In case they would not do this he declared they would be excluded from the fellowship of the Church.
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> This severe procedure did not please all the bishops. Irenaeus of Lyons and others wrote to Pope Victor; they blamed his severity, urged him to maintain peace and unity with the bishops of Asia, and to entertain

> affectionate feelings toward them. Irenaeus reminded him that his predecessors had indeed always maintained the Sunday observance of Easter, as was right, but had not broken off friendly relations and communion with bishops because they followed another custom (Eusebius, "Hist. eccl.", V, xxiii-xxv.) We have no information concerning the further course of the matter under Victor I so far as it regards the bishops of Asia. All that is known is that in the course of the third century the Roman practice in the observance of Easter became gradually universal. In Rome itself, where Pope Victor naturally enforced the observance of Easter on Sunday by all Christians in the capital, an Oriental named Blastus, with a few followers, opposed the pope and brought about a schism, which, however, did not grow in importance (Eusebius, loc. cit., B, xx). Pope Victor also had difficulties with a Roman priest named Florinus, who probably came from Asia Minor. As an official of the imperial court, Florinus had become acquainted in Asia Minor with St. Polycarp...
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> Tertullian reports ("Ad Praceam", 1) that a Roman bishop, whose name he does not give, had declared his acceptance of the prophecies of Montanus, but had been persuaded by Praxeas to withdraw. Duchesne ("Histoire ancienne de l'église", I, 278) and others think Tertullian means Pope Eleutherius, but many investigators consider it more probable that he meant Pope Victor, because the latter had had much to do with the inhabitants of Asia Minor, and because, between 190 and 200 (Kirsch J.P. Transcribed by Michael T. Barrett. The Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume XV. Copyright © 1912 by Robert Appleton Company. Online Edition Copyright © 2003 by K. Knight. Nihil Obstat, October 1, 1912. Remy Lafort, S.T.D., Censor. Imprimatur. +John Cardinal Farley, Archbishop of New York).

So there are three issues:

1) Did the Roman Bishop Victor have the authority over other churches?
2) Did he have the authority to enforce a change based on tradition over the Bible?
3) Should he have said something against the Montanists heretics?

The correct answers, which are essentially discussed later, are 1) No, 2) No, and 3) Yes, if he was attempting to stick with biblical Christianity.

Authority over Churches to Enforce Tradition over the Bible?

Bishop Victor apparently felt that he had the authority to impose his will on the churches of Asia Minor. But they refused. It is also important to note recall that Irenaeus told Victor that he should not have tried to impose Roman traditions on the Asia Minor churches.

The Orthodox Church reports this brief explanation of events in one of its timelines:

> 193 A.D. - Council of Rome, presided over by Bishop Victor, condemns the celebration of Pascha on Nisan 14, and addresses a letter to Polycrates of Ephesus and the Churches in Asia.
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> 193 A.D. - Council of Ephesus, presided over by Bishop Polycrates, and attended by several bishops throughout Asia, reject the authority of Victor of Rome, and keep the Asian paschal tradition (Markou, Stavros L. K. An Orthodox Christian Historical Timeline. Copyright © 2003 OrthodoxFaith.com).

The Catholic writer Eusebius recorded that Polycrates of Ephesus, around 195 A.D. wrote the following to the Roman Bishop Victor who, as the previous writing showed, wanted all who professed Christ to change Passover from the 14th of Nisan to Sunday:

> We observe the exact day; neither adding, nor taking away. For in Asia also great lights have fallen asleep, which shall rise again on the day of the Lord's coming, when he shall come with glory from heaven, and shall seek out all the saints. Among these are Philip, one of the twelve apostles, who fell asleep in Hierapolis; and his two aged virgin daughters, and another daughter, who lived in the Holy Spirit and now rests at Ephesus; and, moreover, John, who was both a witness and a teacher, who reclined upon the bosom of the Lord, and, being a priest, wore the sacerdotal plate. He fell asleep at Ephesus. And Polycarp in Smyrna, who was a bishop and martyr; and Thraseas, bishop and martyr from Eumenia, who fell asleep in Smyrna. Why need I mention the bishop and martyr Sagaris who fell asleep in Laodicea, or the blessed Papirius, or Melito, the Eunuch who lived altogether in the Holy Spirit, and who

> lies in Sardis, awaiting the episcopate from heaven, when he shall rise from the dead? All these observed the fourteenth day of the passover according to the Gospel, deviating in no respect, but following the rule of faith. And I also, Polycrates, the least of you all, do according to the tradition of my relatives, some of whom I have closely followed. For seven of my relatives were bishops; and I am the eighth. And my relatives always observed the day when the people put away the leaven. I, therefore, brethren, who have lived sixty-five years in the Lord, and have met with the brethren throughout the world, and have gone through every Holy Scripture, am not affrighted by terrifying words. For those greater than I have said ' We ought to obey God rather than man' (Eusebius. Church History, Book V, Chapter 24. Translated by Arthur Cushman McGiffert. Excerpted from *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series Two, Volume 1*. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. American Edition, 1890. Online Edition Copyright © 2004 by K. Knight).

Notice that Polycrates said that he and the other early church leaders (like the Apostles Philip and John, and their successors like Polycarp, Thraseas, Sagaris, Papirius, Melito) would not deviate from the Bible, and that they knew the Bible taught them to keep the Passover on the correct date, and not on a Sunday. Polycrates also reminded the Roman bishop that true followers of Christ "obey God rather than men."

Hence it is clear that throughout the second century, the churches in Asia Minor continued to observe the Passover on the 14th of Nisan (and for doing so, they were labeled as Quartodecimans by the Romans), unlike the Romans, and they refused to accept the authority of any Roman bishop over scripture.

Perhaps the following report from the Catholic saint and doctor Jerome about Victor should also be considered:

> Victor believed that the many bishops of Asia and the East, who with the Jews celebrated the passover, on the fourteenth day of the new moon, were to be condemned. But even those who differed from them did not support Victor in his opinion. (Jerome. De Viris Illustribus (On Illustrious Men), Chapter 35)

This report confirms that the Bishop of Rome simply was not seen as having

primacy over Christendom at this time (see also Apostolic Succession).

Jerome also wrote:

> Polycrates bishop of the Ephesians with other bishops of Asia who in accordance with some ancient custom celebrated the passover with the Jews on the fourteenth of the month, wrote a synodical letter against Victor bishop of Rome in which he says that he follows the authority of the apostle John and of the ancients. From this we make the following brief quotations, We therefore celebrate the day according to usage, inviolably, neither adding anything to nor taking anything from it, for in Asia lie the remains of the greatest saints of those who shall rise again on the day of the Lord, when he shall come in majesty from heaven and shall quicken all the saints, I mean Philip one of the twelve apostles who sleeps at Hierapolis and his two daughters who were virgins until their death and another daughter of his who died at Ephesus full of the Holy Spirit. And John too, who lay on Our Lord's breast and was his high priest carrying the golden frontlet on his forehead, both martyr and doctor, fell asleep at Ephesus and Polycarp bishop and martyr died at Smyrna. Thraseas of Eumenia also, bishop and martyr, rests in the same Smyrna. What need is there of mentioning Sagaris, bishop and martyr, who sleeps in Laodicea and the blessed Papyrus and Melito, eunuch in the Holy Spirit, who, ever serving the Lord, was laid to rest in Sardis and there awaits his resurrection at Christ's advent. These all observed the day of the passover on the fourteenth of the month, in nowise departing from the evangelical tradition and following the ecclesiastical canon. I also, Polycrates, the least of all your servants, according to the doctrine of my relatives which I also have followed (for there were seven of my relatives bishops indeed and I the eighth) have always celebrated the passover when the Jewish people celebrated the putting away of the leaven. And so brethren being sixty-five years old in the Lord and instructed by many brethren from all parts of the world, and having searched all the Scriptures, I will not fear those who threaten us, for my predecessors said "*It is fitting to obey God rather than men*."
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> I quote this to show through a small example the genius and authority of the man. He flourished in the reign of the emperor Severus in the same period as Narcissus of Jerusalem. (Jerome. De Viris Illustribus (On Illustrious Men), Chapter 45)

This confirms that Jerome respected the fact that Polycrates would not accept the authority of a bishop of Rome over the Bible.

The True Church Was Anti-Montanist

The Montanists were not rebuked by Bishop Victor. This shows that he did not feel he had the doctrinal integrity to stand against them. No bishop of Rome was considered to have had universal authority by most professing Christians by Victor's time (even though Victor seemed to feel otherwise).

However, the church leaders in Antioch and Asia Minor took a stand against the Montanists. Serapion of Antioch, Apollonius of Ephesus, Apollinaris of Hierapolis, and Thraseas of Eumenia opposed the Montanist heresies (since Apollinaris of Hierapolis and Thraseas of Eumenia were Quartodecimans, it is likely that Serapion and many other anti-Montanists were as well). Eusebius records that:

> This same Apollonius states in the same work that, at the time of his writing, it was the fortieth year since Montanus had begun his pretended prophecy...
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> Serapion, who, as report says, succeeded Maximinus at that time as bishop of the church of Antioch, mentions the works of Apolinarius against the above-mentioned heresy. And he alludes to him in a private letter to Caricus and Pontius, in which he himself exposes the same heresy, and adds the following words:
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> "That you may see that the doings of this lying band of the new prophecy, so called, are an abomination to all the brotherhood throughout the world, I have sent you writings of the most blessed Claudius Apolinarius, bishop of Hierapolis in Asia." In the same letter of Serapion the signatures of several bishops are found, one of whom subscribes himself as follows: "I, Aurelius Cyrenius, a witness, pray for your health." And another in this manner: "Aelius Publius Julius, bishop of Debeltum, a colony of Thrace. As God liveth in the heavens, the blessed Sotas in Anchialus desired to cast the demon out of Priscilla, but the hypocrites did not permit him" (Eusebius Book V, Chapters 18-19).

Of the Montanists, according to *The Catholic Encyclopedia*:

> the date of Thraseas is therefore about 160, and the origin of Montanism must be yet earlier...**We hear of no false doctrines at first**...St. Jerome's account, written in 384...describes them as Sabellians in their idea of the Trinity (Chapman J. Transcribed by Robert B. Olson. Montanists. The Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume X. Copyright © 1911 by Robert Appleton Company. Online Edition Copyright © 2003 by K. Knight. Nihil Obstat, October 1, 1911. Remy Lafort, S.T.D., Censor. Imprimatur. +John Cardinal Farley, Archbishop of New York).

One of the so-called Montanist Oracles was:

> "**I am the Father and the Son and the Paraclete**." (Didymus, De trinitate iii. 41. 1.) (Assembled in P. de Labriolle, *La crise montaniste* (1913), 34-105, by Bates College, Lewston (Maine) http://abacus.bates.edu/Faculty/Philosophy%20and%20Religion/rel_241/texts/montanism.html 01/31/06).

This is one of the first references to a trinitarian view of the Godhead (the other earliest one was from the heretic Valentinus). The paraclete is a term used to signify the Holy Spirit (it is from the Greek term *parakletos*).

As late as the end of the second century and the beginning of the third, Roman Bishops still were not trinitarian as now understood--Victor adhered to Sabellianism--a concept that was later condemned. Notice this astonishing admission from a Protestant scholar:

> Sabellius taught the strict unity of the godhead: "one Person (*hypostasis*), three names." God is *hyiopater*, Son-Father. The different names Father, Son, and Spirit, merely describe different forms of revelation; the Son revealed the Father as a ray reveals the sun. Now the Son has returned to heaven, and God reveals himself as the Holy Spirit...Despite these flaws, Sabelliansim seems to have won the adherence of two bishops of Rome, Victor and Zephyrinus, both who were involved in bitter struggles with the adoptionists. Zephyrinus' successor, Callistus, repudiated Sabellius, but continued to use rather Sabellian language...The entanglement of these three bishops...has proved a continuous embarrassment to the traditionalist Roman Catholic

> doctrine of papal infallibility...
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> The modalism of Sabellius influenced later orthodox formulations in that it insisted on the deity of the Holy Spirit...By insisting that the Holy Spirit is also God, Sabellianism helped counteract the tendency to what we might call ditheism (Brown HOJ. Heresies: Heresy and Orthodoxy in the History of the Church. Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody (MA), 1988, p. 103).

If the doctrine of the trinity is so critical to being a "Christian" than why did not even the Roman bishops misunderstand it so much? Could it have been because the true Church was never Sabellian nor trinitarian? If the doctrine of the trinity was true from the beginning (which it was not), **why do Protestant scholars feel the need to credit Sabellianism for insisting that the Holy Spirit is God?** The simple truth is that the early true Church never considered that the Holy Spirit was God or that God was some type of trinity.

Notice that Sabellianism was condemned from the start in Asia Minor, then decades later in Rome according to Roman Catholic scholars:

> Yet further evidence regarding the Church's doctrine is furnished by a comparison of her teaching with that of heretical sects. The controversy with the Sabellians in the third century proves conclusively that she would tolerate no deviation from Trinitarian doctrine. Noetus of Smyrna, the originator of the error, was condemned by a local synod, about A.D. 200. Sabellius, who propagated the same heresy at Rome c. A.D. 220, was excommunicated by St. Callistus (Joyce GH. The Blessed Trinity. The Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume XV. Published 1912. New York: Robert Appleton Company. Nihil Obstat, October 1, 1912. Remy Lafort, S.T.D., Censor. Imprimatur. +John Cardinal Farley, Archbishop of New York).

It should be noted that the above writing is a bit in error. While it is true that the Church in Asia Minor (Symrna) would not tolerate Sabellian heresy from the beginning, the Roman Catholic Church did until around 220 A.D. (this is further proof that the Location of the Main Early True Church Was Asia Minor, Not Rome).

Since the true Church of God is binitarian, it is logical that any affiliated with it would have opposed any trinitarian or Sabellian teachings. Roman leaders seemed

to be tolerant of the Montanists until sometime after Serapion and others in Asia Minor condemned them (Rome finally condemned the Montanists, but not for this doctrine, and not by Victor) and the same is apparently true of Sabellianism.

Was He A Pope?

Technically, Victor was not a pope. The Catholic leaders in Rome did not take that title until after Siricius of the late fourth century. However, he was perhaps the first to try to act like one. And he was not highly successful at that time. This shows that the idea that all of professing Christendom from the time of Linus until at least the early third century accepting the rule of a "Roman bishop" is false.

This is essentially confirmed by the fact that the successor to Victor, Zephyrinus (bishop from 199-217), was "not exceptionally learned or cultured" and was criticized for "not being determined enough to fight the Montantist heresy" (Lopes, p.5). And that the first "anti-pope", Hyppolitus, was elected in the time of Zephyrinus' successor Callistus (Lopes, p.6). It is not likely that any would have then elected an "anti-pope" if they felt that the proper bishop inherited the *cathedra* from Peter through Linus, etc. Furthermore, it is of interest to note that even today, the first "anti-pope" is considered to be a saint by the Roman Catholics, hence they must of felt he was a true Christian leader.

And all of this shows that there were no popes, as we now understand both the title and the position, until at least sometime in the third century.

Was Victor Peter's Spiritual Successor?

While I believe that the records of early church history show that Polycarp of Smyrna was the true and most influential leader of the Church of God after the last apostle (John) died, most who claim to be Roman Catholic believe that Linus, then eventually Bishop Victor, was the actual successor. Conclusions tend to depends on how one views tradition and the Bible. (An article of related interest may be Apostolic Succession.)

Conclusion

There was a Roman Catholic bishop named Victor. He ruled against the Bible on the subject of Passover and attempted to impose his will on other churches, but those in Asia Minor (and apparently also Antioch) refused to accept it.

There is no evidence that he ever overturned tradition to favor the Bible--he

seemed to make the opposite argument. Because of certain Montanist heresies he would not address, that also suggests he held a non-biblical view of Christianity. That is not acceptable to those of us in the Church of God, but does seem to be sufficient for those who accept that and other unbiblical doctrines.

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